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Marriage: Good for What Could Have Ailed You

BY JANNEKE PIETERS
Register Correspondent

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HARPERS FERRY, W. Va. — Joyce (not her real name), a fifty-something practicing Catholic, suffers from diabetes, a blood disorder and difficulty walking. While some of her health problems may be genetic, according to a recent study, they also may be related to the fact she has been both widowed and divorced.

The study, to be published in the September issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* (a journal of the American Sociological Association), shows that health and marital biography are linked. The first study to look at how marital disruptions such as divorce or spousal death can affect a person's health, it joins a growing body of research evidence that getting and staying married for life benefits health.

The study examined four aspects of health in persons aged 51 to 61: chronic conditions, including cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, lung disease, hypertension and stroke; mobility limitations such as trouble climbing stairs or walking; self-rated health, and depressive symptoms. Divorce or death of a spouse often negatively affects all four areas, the study showed.

Divorced or widowed people are 20% more likely to have chronic health conditions than people who are married and 23% more likely to have mobility limitations, according to the study. People who remarried after a divorce or spousal death have significantly more chronic conditions and mobility limitations than those who married once and stayed married.

Those who never married fared better than currently married individuals with a history of divorce or spousal loss, the study showed.

"Think of health as money in the bank," said Linda Waite, co-author of the study and a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago. "Think of a marriage as a mechanism for 'saving' or adding to health. Think of divorce as a period of very high expenditures."

Joyce's life changed dramatically after her first husband died. "Being widowed was very stressful. Mike died in a car accident, and we had no car or life insurance. I had nothing, not even furniture. The one thing that saved me from being completely overwhelmed by grief was that I had two very young children I had to provide for," she said.

The loss of a spouse "produces stress, which produces physiological changes. It increases blood pressure, for example," Waite said. "If you're under stress for the long run, this causes wear and tear on the circulatory system, which can lead to permanent damage. Getting remarried can stop the damage, but you still have to deal with the damage" already done, she said.

The study also found that a person's depressive symptoms may change or diminish after divorce, depending on current marital status. But for chronic health conditions, "divorce casts a longer shadow," Waite said.

Marital Discord

But getting and staying married does not automatically guarantee good health. The quality of the marriage also matters.

While this study did not measure marital happiness, other research shows that "people who are unhappy in their marriages experience bigger physiological changes when there are marital conflicts," Waite said. "They don't get the health benefits of happier marriages."

Carol and Thomas Moran recently celebrated their 42nd wedding anniversary, but they did not always celebrate it. The couple separated in 1991.

"We experienced a total breakdown in communication, understanding and acceptance of each other," Carol said. "I didn't think it could turn around. But what kept me going was I didn't want a divorce."

The couple worked through the crisis, but even now, Carol sees the effects of the separation on their nine children. "Some of the kids have not healed from the difficulties of that time," she said.

The Morans now help people in troubled marriages through Retrouvaille, a program to help couples heal and renew their marriages. The majority of the couples who come through Retrouvaille have "everyday

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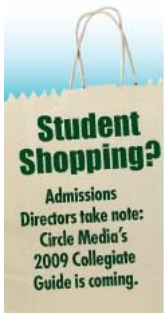
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problems they don't have the tools to deal with," Carol said. The program involves a retreat weekend, six follow-up sessions and an ongoing support group.

Physical and Spiritual Fitness

If divorce can injure the body, then it also can harm the body of Christ: "Divorce does injury to the covenant of salvation, of which sacramental marriage is the sign," according to No. 2384 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Catholics in troubled marriages are reminded that the "grace of Christian marriage is a fruit of Christ's cross" (No. 1615).

Carol now sees their marital difficulties as a grace. "I'm grateful for those struggling times," she said. "I used to think, 'If only their father would do x, y and z.' If we have a disagreement now, I have to look at myself first. I have to learn better tools to get through the situation."

Joyce also has grown from her marital trials. Her second husband divorced her, forcing her to "look at the kind of person I was attracted to." Now, happily married in the Church, she describes herself as "physically falling apart" and occasionally uses a cane to get around.

"If you don't use it, you lose it," she jokes about staying fit — which might apply as well to the grace of a sacramental marriage.

Janneke Pieters writes from Asheville, North Carolina.

Retrouvaille

Retrouvaille.org or HelpOurMarriage.com

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New Study Looks at Divorce and Health Issues

The September issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* includes the first study to look at how marital disruptions such as divorce or spousal death can affect a person's health.

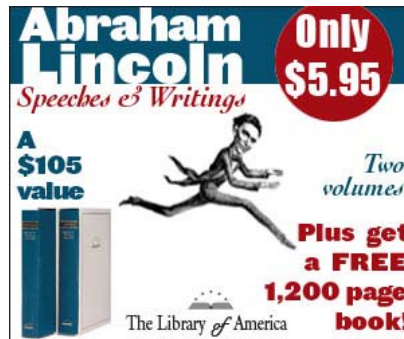
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— Mental health is more responsive than chronic conditions to marital status.

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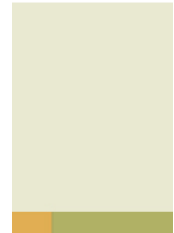
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